

A Daughter's Dowry:

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

Duxbury is endowed with historical homes throughout its various neighborhoods which adds to its charm and distinctive character. Interestingly, of all our date boarded historical homes very few contain female names. The town's numerous



ma le n a m e d a t e b o a r d s r e v e a l t h e s i g n i f i c a n t l y d i f f e r e n t r o l e

men and women played compared with their latter generations. When one does happen upon a female date board, a certain curiosity arises and further exploration often leads to an unusual story. This is the case in the Hannah Sprague Partridge House located on Washington Street which has been lovingly restored by Carol and Kenneth Driscoll.

Hannah Sprague married Ralph Partridge on April 19th, 1812. She was only fourteen years old. Partridge was twenty-eight and a Duxbury teacher at the time. The couple moved into the hip-roof federal built on the corner of her father's land, the Honorable Seth Sprague. It abutted the school house lot.

No records have been found which confirm whether Ralph Partridge taught at this particular school house known as the East School according to the

Ford Map of Duxbury dated 1833, and now the entrance to the current St. John's Church driveway. However, the federal styled house's proximity to the school may explain why the couple chose to settle on this section of Sprague land. It is also unknown whether Hannah, given her young age, was a student of Partridge's. Certainly marriage to a young girl by an older gentleman, and even by her teacher, would not be out of the ordinary for those times.

Her husband, Ralph Partridge, was the son of Calvin and Mary Partridge. During the revolution, Calvin Partridge

"was chosen to command one of the militia companies of the town," noted historian Justin Winsor. It was the Rhode Island expedition in which Calvin Partridge commanded the forces sent from Duxbury, and afterwards was "elevated to the rank of colonel." Winsor also notes how Calvin Partridge's "joviality and jocoseness" placed him in high regard by his contemporaries.

Hannah Partridge was the eleventh child of the Honorable Seth Sprague and Deborah Sampson. Her father was also a recognized man in the community and country. The Hon. Sprague inherited his family's farm in 1775 at the age of fifteen, leaving him to take on the responsibilities of the farm and care for his mother.

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"The Sprague farm ran along the side of Harrison Street from the Bradford land down to the bay," noted former town historian, Dorothy Wentworth. "The house, which stood on the east side of the road, no longer stands, but Sprague's barn still stands...and is now the Sprague-Parker Club House of the Duxbury Yacht Club," noted town historian Katherine Pillsbury.

Hannah's father also served in the American Revolution and continued serving until 1778. Then he tried his luck at fishing off the Grand Banks but

soon realized fishing was a "hard, laborious, and dangerous work with small returns." So he began a small trading company and with the success of this he started a shipbuilding business.

"Seth Sprague reopened another older yard farther south near the store now Sweetser's, and since a new highway (Washington Street) had been built in the meantime, he launched his vessels across it to the bay behind the store," noted Wentworth. The foundation of Hannah's hip roof federal is made from the large granite ballast used on ships, and probably came from her family's shipping business.

Hannah's father also pursued a political life. He served twenty-seven years in the State Legislature, House and Senate, and was a member twice of the Electoral College, which determines the President and Vice-President of the United States. He was well known for his opposition to slavery and his part in the building of the Methodist Episcopal Church. With his wife Deborah, Sprague had fifteen children, eleven daughters including Hannah and four sons, who were all born on the family farm.

The architecture and size of Hannah's house is indicative of

residents who lived a simple life. The original part of the house is a slim-downed version of the larger more elaborate federal houses typically built by merchants and sea captains in those times. Hannah's brother, Seth Sprague Jr., built his large federal in 1813 for his new bride on his father's land just down the road from Hannah's house at the corner of what is now Washington and Harrison Street.

The molding and transoms in the Hannah Partridge House although simple adds a final touch to the restoration. When the Driscoll's purchased the

house in 1990 the historical portion of the home had been used as commercial office space. Once a real estate office and also an accountant's business, there had been modifications to the front parlor and keeping rooms and the Driscolls set out to return their federal home to its original beauty and charm.

They took out the wall to wall carpeting and anything else that was not original to the spaces. "All the pine floors were redone and we added a new heating system, all new plumbing, did sill work and sister boarded all the old beams in the basement," explained Ken Driscoll. The couple located a carpenter, Billy McClellan who specialized in the restoration of old houses and was able to repair the pine floors and replace rotted boards with old pine period planks. "We kept the good things and if it wasn't historical out it went," added Carol Driscoll.

In the original keeping room, now the family's formal dining room, the Driscoll's removed a 1950s hutch and replaced it with a beautiful reproduction built-in cabinet. It contains molding and lead glass more indicative of the home's period. The room also contains a large hearth, complete with a bee-hive stove, where Hannah Partridge once cooked her family's meals. The windows are all original with 12 over 12 panes and the doors contain their original latch hardware. This keeping room leads to what was once probably an attached shed or summer kitchen. It is no longer evident but blends into the newer addition of a kitchen and family room.

As with many historical houses, it appears the original staircase was replaced with a larger more formal stairwell, often done during the Greek Revival period, and there is evidence in the doors of this space that they were cut to accommodate the foyer and large stairwell.

The Driscoll's repaired the ceilings where there had been water damage. Certain molding and wainscoting had been removed to accommodate office needs which the couple had reproduced and returned to its original place. There are three bedrooms in the historic section of the house. The original centered chimney serves four fireplaces, two downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs.

The steps leading to the cellar are original and reminded this writer of descending down the stairs of a tall ship. They lead to a small cellar located under half of the front section of the house. Here one can view the original beams and extensive work the Driscolls had done to sure up the house. "We also had to replace the sills all the way around the house," added Ken Driscoll.

The front door still has its original bulls-eye glass windows and original hardware. "A closet door in the front parlor once led to a porch," said Driscoll. This porch would have faced the school, and perhaps Hannah sat there while her husband taught only a short distance away.

How Hannah came to own the house and not her husband is also an interesting journey into a family's genealogy. Her father retained ownership of the house while Hannah and Ralph moved in and began a family. They had four children, Almeda, Ralph, Welthea Little, and George Leroy Partridge.

Their son Ralph died at sea when he was twenty, and according to Duxbury vital records "his death was caused by a fall from the mizen topsail yard of the ship *Vancouver* to the deck." Daughter Almeda would later marry William Ellison, "the great-grandfather of Duxbury benefactor William Partridge Ellison," noted Pillsbury.

Hannah did not receive the house in her father's will but instead received a sizeable sum for those days of \$1500, as did all her sisters, when her father passed away in 1847. Prior to his death, in 1831, the Hon. Sprague deeded the house which Hannah and her family were living in to her brothers Seth Jr. and Captain Phineas Sprague.

Hannah herself came to own the house and land outright by the devise of a will and deed. Her brother Seth's will in 1856 gave Hannah the house with the stipulation if Hannah died it was to go to her son George. A deed giving her the other half interest in the property came from the heirs of Phineas in 1857 for the consideration of one dollar.

Why was there such a complicated ownership path for the house which the Honorable Seth Sprague likely built for his daughter upon her marriage to Ralph Partridge? Why did her father not will or deed the house to Hannah and Ralph who had been raising their family there for thirty-five years by 1847?

For every historical mystery there are many possible explanations. One researcher poses the possibility the Hon. Sprague did not like his son-in-law Ralph Partridge and this deeding of the house to his two sons, who eventually devised a way to give the house to Hannah but not her husband, was done intentionally. However, Ralph, although not a man of wealth given his profession, did come from a respectable family whose father had fought in the revolution and was a well-mannered public servant – a background any father-in-law would be proud of.

Researcher, Toni Kelso, poses another possible scenario to explain the ownership trail. The answer may be found in the fact Ralph Partridge was a teacher. "The gift of the property and securing it in her name may have been a way of making sure it would not be dependent on Ralph's income," said Kelso. "Even then schoolhouse teachers were not making a living wage," he added.

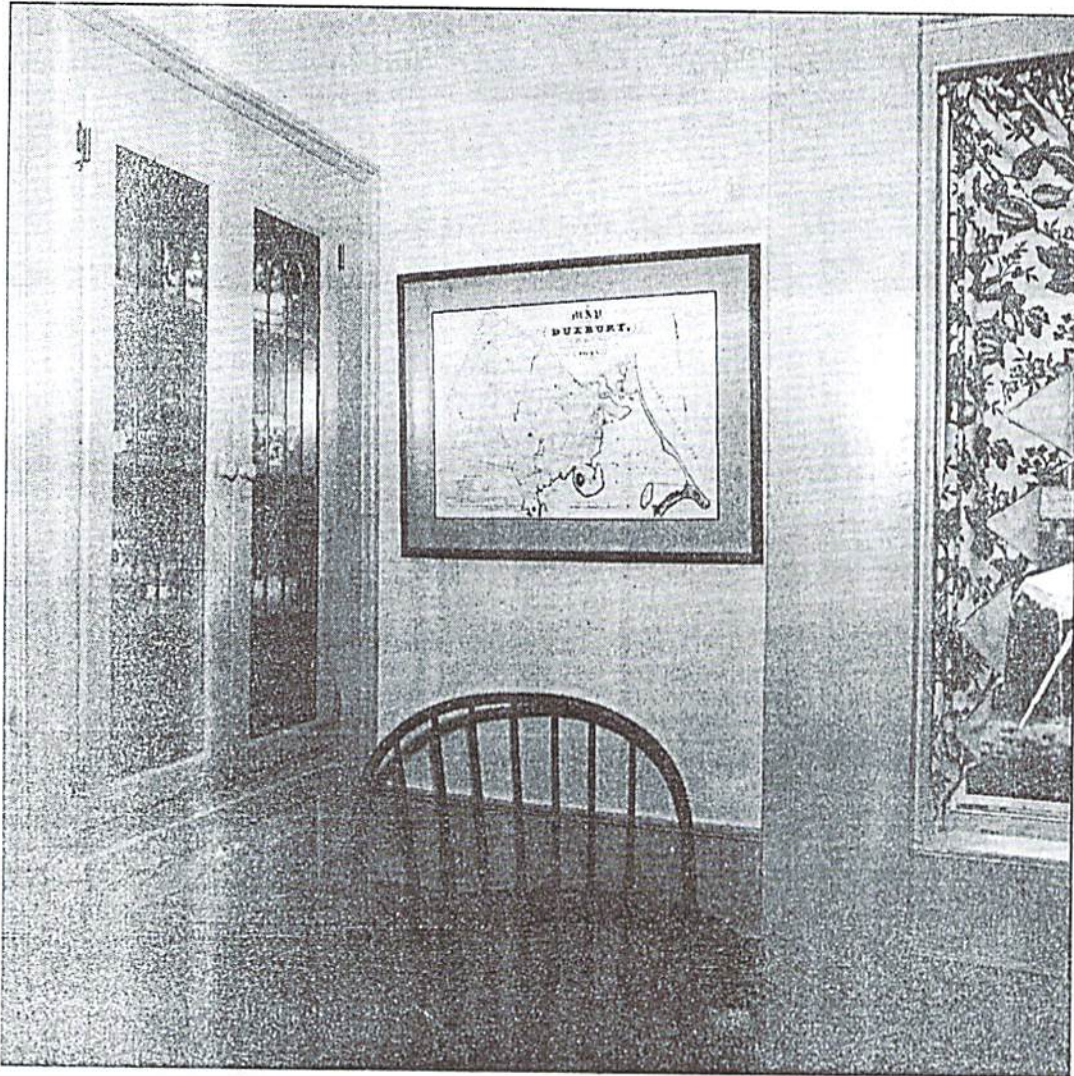
In fact, most teaching salaries in New England "were generally low, decidedly lower than those paid in private school," noted author Katherine Fennelly in her work, *Town Schooling in Early New England 1790 to 1840*. Fennelly also notes in 1828 the average pay in addition to boarding was \$11 a month for men and \$1 a month for female teachers. Teacher's salaries included boarding and were determined by the taxpayers. Ralph Partridge clearly did not require boarding once he married Hannah. Given these facts, perhaps the Sprague family did not want to hurt the couple's only income by bestowing ownership of the house.

Another possibility, given by town historian Katherine Pillsbury, is the Hon. Sprague may have been worried his daughter might pass away before her husband leaving the property to a Partridge and out of Sprague ownership. Recall this land had once been part of a much larger Sprague homestead. Perhaps her father's

deeding the property to his sons was simply a means of retaining family ownership.

In actuality, Hannah outlived her husband Ralph by two years. He passed away in 1869 at the age of eighty-five. Hannah left the fine hip-roofed Federal to her only surviving son, George, who at the time was living with his wife Augusta and their only child Ralph in Chelsea. Soon after his mother's death, he sold the house to Sarah Vinal for \$600, ending the Sprague legacy and ownership in the property. Using a conversion factor from the Consumer Price Index the son received \$7,500 in 1996 currency terms for his mother's home.

The house passed through many owners over the next 102 years until the Driscoll family took ownership. From their labor and love a historical home has been preserved, and the Hannah Sprague Partridge date board adorns its exterior to spark the next passerby's curiosity.



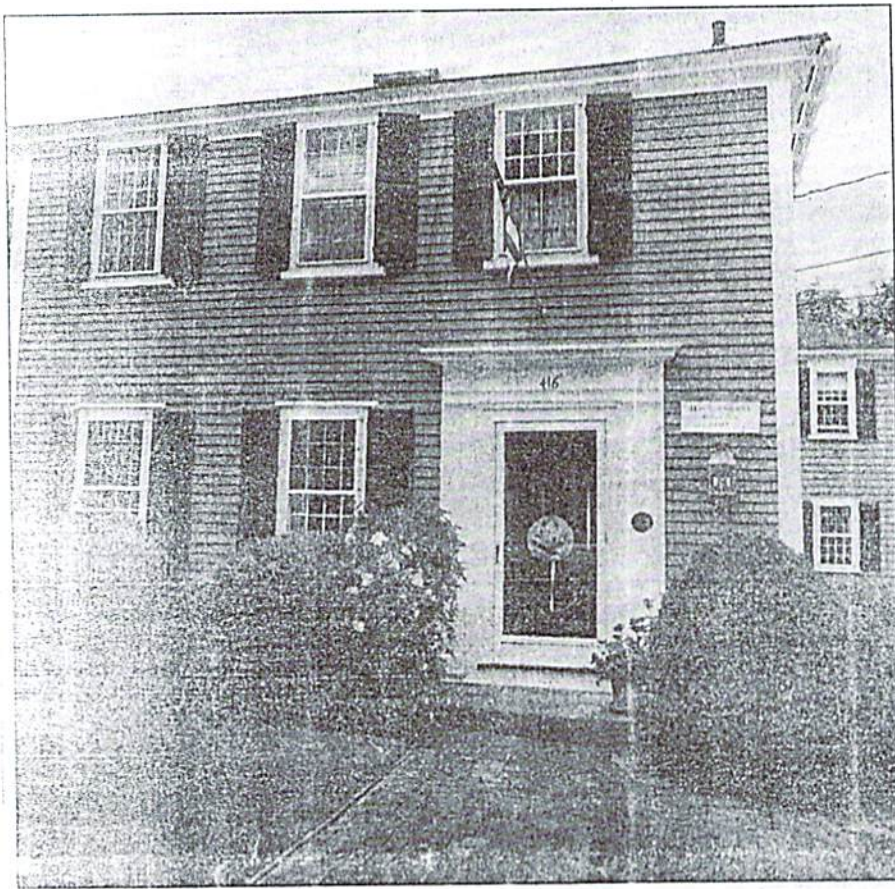
This reproduction cabinet with lead glass replaced a 1950s cabinet and Formica counter not in keeping with the original keeping room.

Photo by Shelly Babin



The front foyer includes the original front door with bulls-eye glass and hardware and the large exposed corner beam.

Hannah Sprague Partridge House

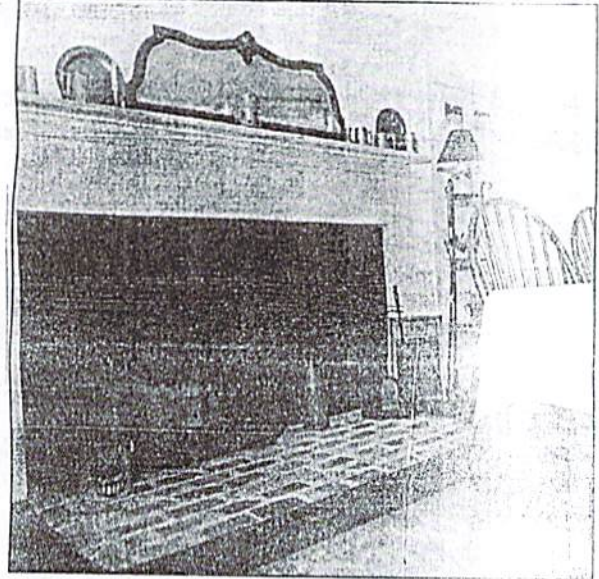


The Hannah Sprague Partridge House circa 1812.

Photos by Shelly Babin



Kenneth and Carol Driscoll have restored this hip-roof Federal on Washington Street.



The original keeping room with large hearth and beehive shelf shows the simple lines and molding.

Photos by Shelly Babin